

**Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 25th January, 2022.**

**Present:-** Councillors Muvvala (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Ali, Minhas, Mohammad and Sandhu

**Also present under Rule 30:-** Councillors Gahir

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillor Begum, Hussain, Kaur and Pollard

**PART 1**

**14. Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

**15. Minutes of the joint Panel/Overview & Scrutiny meeting held on 8th December 2021**

**Resolved** – That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2021 be agreed as a correct record, subject to the following amendment:

Councillor Sandhu was present at the meeting.

Members asked that relevant officers update Members regarding the follow up actions arising from the December meeting of the Panel.

**16. Member Questions**

There were no Member questions.

**17. Customer & Community Directorate Draft Budget 2022/23 Update**

The SBC Director of Place and Community gave a presentation which provided an update on the 2022/23 savings proposals for his directorate.

He advised that the Libraries consultation had been extended by a week to enable Ward Councillors to respond. To date, approximately two thousand responses had been received and were being collated and analysed. An update report would be presented at the March meeting of the Panel.

Members asked the following questions and made the following comments and received the responses set out below.

- Had the consultation been circulated internally? What were the time frames involved?

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The SBC Director stated that the communications team had emailed the consultation internally. The results of the consultation would be reported at the 2 March 2022 Panel meeting and then would be submitted to Cabinet.

- Residents would probably prefer to keep libraries open. The Council had recently passed a motion rejecting the closure of libraries. How could the proposed £400k saving be made without closing libraries?

The SBC Director stated that he could not yet provide a definitive answer. It would depend on a number of different factors and the need to fully conclude the consultation process and collate the responses. Any new strategy would be informed by the consultation results and available budgets. Going forward, it may be that libraries would be converted into multi-function spaces offering a number of different services to residents.

He added that the Council received a management fee from its outsourced leisure services contract. However, due to covid related issues, this had not been paid the previous year. Nevertheless, following extensive discussions with the provider, he was confident that the provider would be in a position to make the payment, particularly since people were now returning to gyms.

He added that the Community and Leisure team were in discussions with the Community Development team regarding youth work and analysing all discretionary spends. For example, it was important to fund initiatives such as the Prevent agenda as youth work had implications for public safety, the benefits of which were difficult to quantify. Public Health had undertaken to fund some wellbeing work carried out by the Community Development team. They were also exploring whether Community Development work could focus on housing tenants and be funded from the HRA (Housing Revenue Account). Recently, a significant number of staff had left the Council and there were not enough staff remaining to cover the remaining roles. Rather than incur redundancy costs, making use of the cross over skills of staff and re-aligning work streams were being considered in this way those teams and their skills could be retained.

- How confident was he that the monies owed to the Council for leisure services would be paid?
- How would the £1.6M be covered? Would the general fund cover this?

The SBC Director stated that the Council was not in a legal dispute with the leisure provider and was engaged in commercial discussions with them. In his view, the matter was unlikely to go to court as the provider had indicated their intention to pay and were contractually obliged to do so. There was a back stop position in the contract should the provider choose to default on the payment. If this were the case, then a significant saving would need to be made elsewhere to cover this potential loss.

- How much funding was available from Public Health and what would it cover?

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The SBC Director advised that £90k of public health funding was to be made available for health related community development work. The money would be available for a year in the first instance, and, if the pilot project was successful then it may be extended further. He explained that this money was not new, public health had opted to focus on this initiative instead of something else, and he was confident of positive outcomes from the pilot project, for example, initiatives to tackle obesity, etc.

- What was included in the youth work for 160K? What progress had been made to date and how long would the funds be available?

The youth work team and youth voice had five full time equivalent posts funded by discretionary spend from the general fund. Officers had been unsuccessful so far in obtaining alternative grant funding but would continue to work to do so.

- Members would like to see the final version of the proposal. When would this be circulated?

The SBC Director advised that the final proposals would be submitted to Council for decision.

With regard to Customer Services, there were a number of options going forward. As more people were accessing council services online, there were plans to implement further channel shift by reducing the number of call centre staff and improve the IT infrastructure to support this move.

- Some Members expressed concern about the adequacy of the Council's IT infrastructure and the impact of a channel shift on vulnerable or disadvantaged residents.

The SBC Director stated that the situation was under review and the balance between call centre and online provision would be monitored closely to ensure the correct balance. Some call centre staff had left and their posts had not been refilled. Some areas were experiencing a surge in demand and this data was being analysed. The Council was working hard to improve its online offer, however, there was more work to be done in terms of trial and error and improving the process.

- Channel shift would cause difficulties for disadvantaged and vulnerable residents.

The SBC Director stated that different work streams and resident cohorts would have different needs. Phone access would continue to be offered, albeit in a reduced capacity while residents would be encouraged to go online wherever possible. The localities hub model would provide an opportunity for additional access and a range of options, within budgetary constraints, would be offered. Whatever changes were implemented, the aim was that the level of service offered should be adequate and appropriate.

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- Why not increase capacity at the call centre for the vulnerable cohort?

The SBC Director advised that the cost of employing additional staff at the call centre would be much higher than investing in channel shift, which was a one off cost. The Council would continue to encourage residents to become more self-sufficient and use online self-service options.

- Would residents be provided with support to access services online e.g. at libraries?

The SBC Director stated that this would be available at libraries and hub buildings. Data showed that a high proportion of people in Slough stated that they had online access and this figure was on the rise. Final decisions would be based on the results of the consultation. The SBC Director advised that any decisions would be based on survey results regarding IT connectivity.

- More work needed to be done in certain service areas such as housing, where a large number of complaints were received regarding the lengthy call waiting times at the call centre.
- How many staff currently work at the call centre?

The SBC Director stated that as part of the savings plan, there were currently 30 full time equivalent staff at the call centre. The performance of the call centre and call waiting times were being monitored.

- What were the responsibilities of the deleted Customer Excellence Lead post and who was now responsible for this area of work?

The SBC Director advised that this not a well-established role. It had been a new post created as part of the Transformation project, however, the officer appointed to the role had left after two months in post. The role was now being covered by the general manager.

He added that there was a high turnover of staff at the call centre and his team were focussing on training to ensure staff were better equipped to deal with complex cases and to ensure speedier call handling.

- Were there any statistics regarding the call centre and any risks associated with the reduction in staff? How was the reduction in staff and move to online being communicated to residents?

The SBC Director undertook to provide this information after the meeting. He added anyone phoning the Council would hear an automated message encouraging them to access services online.

The SBC Director gave a brief outline of the joint archive arrangements with Berkshire authorities. If the Council withdrew from this agreement, then it would be in breach of the agreement. It was important to protect good working relationships with other Berkshire authorities. An element of the fee,

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£25k of the £75k, was fixed and therefore it would not be possible to make a saving on that bit. All archived boxes would need to be checked to see what items could be discarded and which needed to be retained as some documents needed to be retained under law.

If, SBC chose to provide its own storage it would require staff to maintain it and the venue would need to be fire proof and temperature controlled. It should be noted that the service plan was at odds with the recent asset disposal strategy, in that Council owned properties were being sold off and could not be used for storage.

- A Member speaking under Rule 30 asked about the cost of storage. He understood that some documents, for example, leases had not yet been located.

The SBC Associate Director advised that the annual charge was £75k and that alternative storage venues were being explored. Council owned buildings were to be disposed of as part of the asset disposal strategy and it would not therefore be possible to use these ones for document storage. He added that there were costs associated with checking and discarding documents.

- The inventory of documents was found to be inaccurate and incomplete. Some documents may be at other sites such as the old town hall.

The SBC Director advised that many of the deeds had been located, however, a few were yet to be located. If they were not found, there were other methods to prove ownership, however, there was a cost associated with this. The index log of documents was found to be incomplete and inaccurate, so officers had been sent to physically verify documents.

- Were the savings in accommodation achievable?

The SBC Director advised that the savings in accommodation related to the general fund. There was a move from generalist to specialist team which would ensure better use of the workforce and optimum use of grant funding.

- Was the £561k saving in accommodation achievable?

The SBC Director stated that the lack of availability of temporary accommodation was an ongoing issue. Housing managers had good knowledge of the housing market and additional temporary accommodation providers were now available on the market leading to a reduction in the cost per unit. However, this was a demand led service and teams were working to improve processes and reduce costs.

- What percentage of the homelessness budget was grant funded and how would it impact on homelessness in Slough?

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The Council received approximately £1.8M to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping through a series of grants for different things. Certain elements of this funding could be used to fund temporary accommodation for a specific cohort and within specified criteria.

- He had concerns about exploitative private landlords and any reduction in temporary accommodation would impact the most vulnerable residents.

The SBC Director advised that it would be preferable to spend grant monies rather than depending on the general fund to tackle homelessness.

- What impact would this have on rough sleepers – the Council had a statutory responsibility to house the homeless.

The SBC Director responded that it would depend on whether they fulfilled the criteria. The intention was to support rough sleepers to return to mainstream ways of living, where possible.

- How would the archiving costs be covered in the budget?

The SBC Director stated that restructure proposals for the Place and Community Directorate would help to balance any shortfall in the £75k savings target.

**Resolved** – That the presentation be noted.

### 18. HRA Rents & Service Charges 2022/23

The SBC Interim Housing Specialist presented the report HRA Rents and Service Charges 2022/23, which were agreed by Cabinet on 17 January 2022. He advised that the proposed increases to rents, service charges and ancillary charges were in line with government guidance and the Rent Standard published by the Regulator of Social Housing.

Members asked the following questions and received the responses below.

- What was the £8M figure in the HRA budget?

The SBC Interim Housing Specialist advised that the £8M figure was the projected balance of HRA reserves. This had reduced from £18m in 2020/21 following an exceptional repayment of debt in the current year, some of which related to the financial management issues and projects/costs that capitalised in error in the past. This had now been rectified through an accounting adjustment from the revenue budget. However, this adjustment had created a deficit of £9.2M in 2021/22, which would begin to improve in 22/23 with a £2.7M projected budget surplus.

- How were services charges calculated?

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The SBC Interim Housing Specialist advised that it was custom and practice to raise the annual service charge by a set rate, based on services provided, labour and material costs, etc. Government regulations encouraged local authorities to reduce service charges. While continuing this approach for 2022/23, the new housing IT system due to be implemented by Quarter 2 2022/23 would enable charges to be set on a block by block basis for all tenures.

- When had the charges last been increased?

The SBC Interim Housing Specialist advised that this was an annual process undertaken at the beginning of the year and the proposals were then submitted to Cabinet for approval and implemented in April.

- Was the Council building new social housing?

The SBC Interim Housing Specialist responded that this was under discussion. The Council was considering options for the future delivery of additional homes, including delivering schemes jointly with partners. He added that new social housing all operated under the same rent regulations.

- How many Council owned properties had been sold under the 'right to buy' scheme?

The SBC Interim advised that typically between 70-100 properties were sold each year, and that these were not being replaced, hence, there was a deficit but that this variance was reducing. There was a slowdown in applications proceeding to completion during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

- The increase in rents and service charges would affect those on low incomes and the most vulnerable.

The SBC interim advised that for those receiving housing benefit or universal credit their benefits would increase to cover any increase in their rents or service charges. Those on borderline income levels may be able to access benefit support. All clients suffering financial difficulties were signposted to relevant support services.

- Many residents were dissatisfied with the new housing IT system and with the service charge provisions. Was it on target for quarter 3?

The SBC Interim replied that the implementation of the new housing system was progressing well and it was on target for completion by quarter 3. The leasing system and spreadsheets were not yet fully integrated. The method for calculating service charges was not easily understood by tenants. Going forward, tenants would be able to see their account information and charge calculations online. Some tenants had been dissatisfied with the annual review of charges and the issues with delays in service delivery which were related to the pandemic. The quality of service delivery continued to be closely monitored.

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- With regard to £3.5M allocated refunds to tenants for water condensation, were there sufficient monies in the contingency fund to cover these?

The SBC Interim Housing Specialist advised that the scope of refund calculations had been based on the life of the agreement with Thames Water using a complex formula. The likelihood was that the full amount allocated for refunds would not be paid out as not everyone who would have been entitled to a refund will claim.

The SBC Director added that Council rents were relatively low in comparison to private sector rents. The Council was doing a good job of providing and maintaining its rental properties.

**Resolved** – That the report be noted.

**19. Forward Work Programme**

**Resolved:** That the Work Programme be noted and that the following items be added to the work programme for 2021/22:

1. Learning & skills
2. Community & Neighbourhoods

**20. Members' Attendance Record**

**Resolved** – That the attendance record be noted.

**21. Date of Next Meeting**

2 March 2022.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.46 pm)